

# Respect? An Investigation into the Experience of Referees in Association Football

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This article focuses on the response by 2,056 football referees across all 51 County Football Associations in England, the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey to an online survey conducted from 30 September 2015 to 30 November 2015 regarding their experience of officiating since the implementation of a Respect programme in 2008 by the English Football Association. In assessing the impact of the programme, whilst 54 per cent of referees felt that it has been somewhat successful, there remains a need to implement stronger sanctions and show greater support when dealing with cases of misconduct. 60 per cent of referees still experience abuse every couple of games and 19 per cent have experienced some form of physical abuse. With 42 per cent of our sample officiating for less than five years, there is an urgent need for the impact and effectiveness of the programme to be re-evaluated.

**Keywords:** abuse; behaviour; culture; football; Football Association; parents; referees; Respect programme

## Research Context

English football was codified in 1863 and the structure has remained largely untouched. The national football association (FA) is a member association of clubs and County FAs (which are themselves made up of clubs), who are its shareholders. It is structured as a professional game (comprising of the Premier League and the Football League) and a national game, including semi-professional clubs and 30,000 grassroots clubs who are geographically represented by their County FA (Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, 2013: 42).

One important element in servicing this number of teams are referees, but in 2008 the English FA implemented a Respect programme due to the increasing number of referees leaving the game as a result of the poor behaviour of individuals (players, coaches, spectators and parents) and teams.<sup>1</sup> To put the need for this in some form of context, Brackenridge et al. (2011) illustrated that between the 2007/08 and 2008/09 seasons, 17 per cent of active referees had stopped officiating. This was particularly pertinent in the 14 to 18 age band, which has the highest level of referee recruitment, but also the highest level of dropout (Nutt, 2006).

Initially focusing on grassroots football, the Respect programme was quickly applied to the professional game and was implemented in a prevailing socio-political climate where the then Labour government had established a range of policies around a 'respect' agenda addressing social equality and social justice (one element was anti-social behaviour), with an emphasis on responsible behaviour across all areas of society (Gaskell, 2008). According to Lusted (2014), this respect agenda forced national governing bodies of sport to achieve a variety of social equality outcomes through pro-social behaviours and actions that were conditionally attached to public funding mechanisms.

Adopting the characteristics of a public information campaign, the Respect programme was a policy instrument designed to augment the recruitment and retention of

referees by challenging historic culturally embedded norms regarding negative attitudes and behaviours towards them (Webb, 2014a, 2016). Information campaigns are usually a passive instrument aimed at a large targeted population with the aim of altering behaviour through increasing knowledge of a particular issue at a low cost (for example, public health campaigns such as those that emphasise the benefits of increased physical activity or reducing the amount of alcohol intake). In the case of the Respect programme, this consisted of the distribution of an online educational video of the effects of abuse on referees as well as the implementation of policy tools such as a code of conduct that clubs adhere to and the use of barriers (usually a rope) for parents and spectators to remain behind during the game (Cleland et al., 2015). The need for this was illustrated by Nutt (2006) who stated how the close proximity of the pitch to the spectators allowed for increasing cases of harassment and intimidation towards referees.

Focusing on policies seeking to improve behaviour and attitudes in grassroots football, Lusted and O’Gorman (2010) suggested that there was a lack of awareness among those responsible for communicating the policy to the target group – in this case, players, coaches, parents and spectators. This is despite the promotion of expected behavioural standards and codes of conduct through the FA’s Equality Policy, Charter Standard Scheme, Safeguarding Policy and the Laws of the Game. For Harwood and Knight (2009) and Holt et al. (2008), the role of parents and coaches is one of the main influences of good or bad behaviour amongst young footballers. However, in his analysis of Charter Standard accredited clubs (awarded to clubs who are judged to be well-run and prioritise child protection, quality coaching and adhere to the Respect Programme), Nutt (2006) found that officials and parents showed greater levels of respect towards referees and this was reflected in more positive attitudes and behaviours amongst the players. This was also a feature in a pilot of Respect conducted not long after it was introduced by Brackenridge et al. (2011), who reported how young players indicated broadly positive outcomes for the programme.

Research has been conducted on the influence of external variables on refereeing decisions, such as the influence of aggressive teams (Jones et al., 2002), the influence of crowd noise (Unkelbach and Memmert, 2010) and the influence of referees’ decisions on the behaviour of players (Coulomb-Cabagno et al., 2005). However, the actual experiences of football referees themselves are very rarely addressed. In their analysis of referees in American and Australian basketball, Anshel and Weinberg (1995) highlighted how exposure to a violent environment can lead to symptoms associated with clinical stress. However, it is not just the violent aspect that referees face, with the negative responses received from

parents, spectators and coaches found to increase the stress of each individual referee who has a heightened fear of physical harm and interpersonal conflict (Balch and Scott, 2007).

With regards to research that has focused on the experience of football referees, Dell et al. (2016) interviewed 12 referees (3 past and 9 present) and identified three higher order dimensions that referees refer to when stating their reasons for leaving the game: organisational (consisting of a general lack of support and guidance/feedback from the national FA and County FA, with not enough emphasis on relevant practical training); personal (the psychological impact and individual reasons behind quitting) and match (physical and psychological intimidation, including a sense of isolation). These were also highlighted in the study of 11 practising referees at one County FA in England by Cleland et al. (2015), which found that continued incidents of verbal and physical abuse were a contributory factor behind referees leaving the game. Each individual has their own reasons why they drop out, but amongst young referees it is found to often centre on the abuse received from players, coaches, spectators and parents (Nutt, 2006).

Despite these real-life accounts from football referees, there remains a dearth of research on this area, with Dell et al. (2016: 110) expressing the need for ‘qualitative research to explore the subjective experiences of referees’. In widening the focus away from small-scale projects like those of Cleland et al. (2015) and Dell et al. (2016), this article provides an independent real-life account of the impact and effectiveness of the Respect programme from 2,056 referees associated with all 51 County FAs across England, the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey. This was achieved via an online survey that centred on three research questions: (1) what has been their experience of officiating since the introduction of the Respect programme; (2) the extent to which they had been verbally and/or physically abused; and (3) the level of support provided by the national and/or County FA.

## **Method**

The use of online surveys to collect large-scale quantitative and qualitative data has been an increasingly successful methodological tool for sport scholars (Cashmore and Cleland, 2011, 2012, 2014; Cleland and Cashmore, 2014, 2016). One of its advantages is that it allows researchers the opportunity to not only receive large-scale data at the convenience of the participant (i.e. to be completed in their own time), but it also allows for frank and honest accounts that face-to-face survey work might not be able to capture (and thus also avoid the potential bias of social desirability). Despite its many strengths however, online research also poses a number of ethical issues concerning potential harm, consent, privacy, and deception

(as identified by Griggs, 2011). In addressing these, we followed the guidelines expressed within 'The Association of Internet Researchers' about the ethical practice of conducting research in online environments. For example, reference was made in the introductory paragraph sent to all participants about the aim of the research and the universities involved. It also contained a link that took the participants directly to the survey where they could see that there was no invasion of privacy as the responses were anonymous. The intention was to avoid any potential harm or identity deception as it allowed each participant to voluntarily consent to reflecting on their experience, whilst they were reminded at the end of the survey that 'by clicking finish, you are giving your consent for your views to be used as part of this project'.

For the purposes of this project, contact was made with the national FA who agreed to distribute the paragraph providing the project description and link to the survey through their own online network of registered referees as well as via the 51 County FAs and the Referees' Association. The nature of the sample was purposive as it involved a non-probability sampling method aimed purely at football referees because of the unique position they held in addressing the research questions raised earlier (Byrne, 2004; Schutt, 2009).

The survey was conducted from 30 September 2015 to 30 November 2015 and out of approximately 28,000 registered referees, 2,056 completed the survey. 96.5 per cent of the respondents were male, 18.4 per cent were under the age of 17, 8.2 per cent were aged 18 to 21, 4.1 per cent were aged 22 to 25, 10.1 per cent were aged 26 to 35, 11.8 per cent were aged 36 to 45, 23.4 per cent were aged 46 to 55 and 24 per cent were aged 56+. 33 per cent of the participants were referees at level 7 (junior), 29.8 per cent were at level 5 and 13.5 per cent at level 6.<sup>2</sup> The survey also contained 10 responses by referees at level 1 (national list) and seven who are on the select group (i.e. referee in the English Premier League). 22.7 per cent of the sample had refereed for 2 years or less, 19.6 per cent had refereed for 3 to 5 years, 17.1 per cent had refereed for 6 to 10 years, 11 per cent had refereed for 11 to 15 years, 9.1 per cent had refereed for 16 to 20 years and 20.5 per cent had refereed for 21 years or more. This gave our sample a good range of different ages and levels, some of whom had started refereeing since the introduction of the Respect programme in 2008, whilst a significant number of others could compare what it was like before 2008.

Of course, there are referees (particularly those at level 10 who are technically still listed as a referee but are recognised as currently inactive – usually older officials who have retired) who do not have internet access, but given that the FA use Match Official Administration System to electronically announce the appointments of referees at matches,

we were confident that the vast majority of registered referees would have received the email from either the national FA, County FA or the Referees' Association about the objectives of the research. We also recognise that the survey was self-selecting and this does allow for an inflated bias, but as the most comprehensive attempt to provide a wide ranging response to the impact of the Respect programme, we felt that it did not suffer from more-traditional sampling errors as participation was voluntary and engaged with a number of networks available to referees.

The survey contained a number of closed questions that included their gender, age, current level of refereeing and how long they had been refereeing. The closed questions also focused on the extent to which the Respect programme had improved their experience, the regularity of what they deem to be verbal abuse, whether they had suffered from physical abuse and the level of support they receive from the national and County FA. Three open-ended text boxes were also included where each referee was given the opportunity to address the three research questions illustrated earlier by openly writing about their experiences of refereeing since 2008. In reflecting this, the analysis below will address each of these by focusing on the descriptive statistical data and open-ended narrative provided by the referees.

To minimize subjectivity and aid the validity and reliability of inductively analysing the open-ended data, each author initially worked independently and engaged in a number of open coding phases to identify the emergence of dominant patterns, commonalities and differences within the comments (Bryman, 2012). When this had been completed, the authors worked together in a collaborative process of interpretation and verification that resulted in a number of consistent themes within each research question. In presenting the data, although no details regarding personal identity were asked, the demographic detail of each referee, their level and the years they have been refereeing will be included in order to provide a context to their experiences.

### **Changing Attitudes and Behaviours towards Referees?**

The issue with a public information campaign like Respect is the inability to tackle deeply embedded cultural norms where referees at all levels of the game continue to face dissent and aggressive behaviour. Although Brackenridge et al. (2011) reported broadly positive impressions of Respect in the immediate years following its introduction, the response by referees in our study was mixed. For example, when they were asked how successful the Respect programme had been for them, 7.2 per cent said very successful, 47 per cent said somewhat successful, 17.2 per cent had no opinion, 22.1 per cent said somewhat unsuccessful

and 6.5 per cent said very unsuccessful. Illustrating a common response amongst those who felt little had actually changed, this level 6 referee (male, aged 56+ with 21+ years' experience) stated: 'A small minority have taken notice, but old habits die hard and it will take a very long time for people to accept a change', whilst a level 7 (junior) referee (male, aged 36 to 45, with 3 to 5 years' experience) commented:

The behaviour of players, coaches and spectators is deemed acceptable and almost a badge of honour. The lack of respect and punishment is informing our younger players and coaches that this kind of behaviour is 'the norm'.

Indeed, a consistent theme in the data was reference to the behaviour of parents at the grassroots level, where their competitive nature is viewed as problematic by a significant number of youth league referees (as identified by Dell et al., 2016; Nutt, 2006). These views were not universal however, with some responses stating an improvement in parental behaviour, such as this response from a level 7 (junior) referee (male, aged 46 to 55, with 3 to 5 years' experience):

Parents of youth players in the league that I officiate in are less vociferous than they used to be. They are expected to encourage players and not to harangue them or shout instructions at them. The coaches are expected to respect the decision of the referee and on the whole this has been the case. This has been a welcome development in youth football.

One of the features of the Respect programme has been the introduction of barriers or a rope to move spectators further away from the touchline yet, for a number of referees, the environment has not improved. As Respect is a public information campaign, there is no obligation for the target group (parents, players, coaches and spectators) to respond in a positive manner (Cleland et al. 2015). Indeed, for some referees, such as this level 6 referee (male, aged 56+, with 11 to 15 years' experience), there is serious doubt as to what the programme can actually achieve in its present form:

Behaviour is even worse now than in 2008. Respect is meaningless as a policy. People either have respect for others or they don't. You can't enforce respect by diktat. Badges, slogans, handshakes etc. mean nothing if they are merely a matter of routine for people to go through the motions. The whole respect programme is a sham. When referees do their job correctly by penalising bad conduct and issuing red/yellow cards, they are subjected to all manner of vilification and intimidation. Regrettably, there are now even more morons and thugs involved in football than in days gone by.

Given examples like this of the continued presence of culturally embedded norms of negative behaviours towards referees, one of the most important factors of public information campaigns is to keep them in the public consciousness. For some referees, including this level

5 referee (male, aged 46 to 55, with 6 to 10 years' experience), it is an area that can be improved: 'There is a slight improvement when the programme is in the press, but it drops to normal levels when it is not in the public domain.' Similar views regarding a perceived loss of momentum were also raised by this level 5 referee (male, aged 46 to 55, with 21+ years' experience):

The conduct of spectators, coaches and managers, especially at youth games, did actually show some improvement for a couple of seasons, but over time has decline dramatically, with many referees not wishing to officiate youth games at all. If a young referee challenges a coach or manager for anything, they are usually met with sarcastic responses, ignored completely or even abused.

However, there were other referees who had noticed a positive improvement in their experience since 2008. In providing one example of the 54 per cent who thought the programme had been very successful or somewhat successful, this level 4 referee (male, aged 26 to 35, with 6 to 10 years' experience) commented:

There has been a marked change in touchline behaviour in youth leagues. The attitude of parents took a while to alter but the introduction of the Respect 'Barrier' with coaches' one side and spectators the other made a huge difference.

Other referees, including this level 6 referee (male, aged 36 to 45, with 3 to 5 years' experience), have experienced a mixed response on a match day:

Some clubs embrace the ethos and are a pleasure to visit and work with, whereas others conduct themselves in a disgraceful manner and this normally runs throughout the whole team, including staff.

Whilst there were referees who stated an improving experience in youth leagues, there were others who remained highly critical. One example came from a level 5 (male, aged 46 to 55, with 21+ years' experience) referee: 'Youth football remains a problem, where clubs have ticked all the boxes to be awarded Charter Standard status, but I am unsure whether some of them have ever seen a Code of Conduct, let alone signed one!', whilst similar thoughts were also raised by this level 6 (male, aged 56+, with 3 to 5 years' experience) referee: 'Many clubs are given the 'Charter Standard' badge, but I believe this is just a 'box ticking' exercise where most coaches, players, parents have no idea of what it means.'

### **The Extent of Verbal and Physical Abuse**

When the referees were asked how often they received what they considered to be verbal abuse, 22.1 per cent said every match, 37.6 per cent said every couple of matches, 30.3 per cent said a couple of times a season, 3.8 per cent said every few years and 6.2 per cent said

never. This highlights a concerning fact for the national FA and County FAs that nearly two-thirds of referees are continuing to experience verbal abuse at least every couple of matches, with less than 10 per cent claiming to have never received verbal abuse or had done so every few years. With regards to the 10 per cent who claimed not to have received verbal abuse, given the literature raised above concerning the behaviour of players, coaches and parents (Balch and Scott, 2007; Dell et al., 2016; Harwood and Knight, 2009; Holt et al., 2008), it could be that these referees 'expect' abuse and could play it down as something that is culturally embedded in the game (Webb, 2014a, 2016).

As expressed by this Level 4 referee (male, aged 26 to 35, with 6 to 10 years' experience): 'The level of abuse that match officials are expected to deal with would be unacceptable in any other occupation.' This was taken further by a level 5 referee (male, aged 36 to 45, with 6 to 10 years' experience), who outlined: 'We are just a number who get paid £15 or £20 to receive abuse for 2 hours every match.' For some, this leads them to leaving the game, with testimonies present in the data such as by this level 7 (junior) referee (male, aged 18 to 21, with 3 to 5 years' experience):

The national FA believe that the Respect programme is working and they are stuck in a deluded fantasy that what they are doing is brilliant and this is improving refereeing, yet thousands of referees quit due to the shit they get on a weekly basis.

A significant number of personal narratives highlighted the extent of abuse referees continue to face, such as this example from a level 5 referee (male, aged 46 to 55, with 21+ years' experience):

I got attacked from behind and kicked repeatedly while unconscious. I was not supported at all well by the County or national FA. I felt like I was the one on trial and had absolutely no aid or direct support. Only a refereeing colleague and the Referees' Association helped me through this terrible incident and encouraged me to continue officiating. The offender was prosecuted by the police and received a suspended prison sentence.

Likewise, a level 4 referee (male, aged 26 to 35, with 6 to 10 years' experience) illustrated:

A manager threatened to kill me and had to be restrained from assaulting me. The County FA gave him a slap on the wrist and consequently I gave up my level 4 as I felt I had no backing of the County FA. Regarding this incident, at no time was I contacted about my welfare.

These were two examples of the 18.9 per cent of referees who said they had been the victim of physical abuse. Despite the emphasis placed by the FA on eliminating abuse, with nearly one in five referees having faced physical abuse it illustrates the dangerous situations many of them face on a regular basis. Indeed, Forde (2013) reported on data released by the FA in



November 2013 outlining how 975 adults (including players and managers) were charged with improper conduct towards match officials in the period July 2012 to November 2013. Although the FA reported in 2012 how serious cases of assault towards referees had decreased by 15 per cent, the number of incidents of improper conduct had risen by 25 per cent. Indeed, there were some referees, such as this level 7 (junior) referee (male, aged 26 to 35, with 6 to 10 years' experience), who had left the game for a period of time due to the abuse they received and when they returned had found little had changed:

I reported the abuse I received, but the response was poor from the County FA, which led me to take leave from officiating. I returned this year after an 8-year hiatus and very little has changed in player attitudes.

By regularly facing verbal and physical intimidation, referees felt anxious and vulnerable and openly questioned their motivation to continue. As outlined earlier, 42 per cent of referees in this study had refereed for 5 years or less and unless there is a substantial improvement that positively impacts on their experience, then the likelihood is that referees will continue to leave the game and render the intentions of the Respect programme as worthless. One of the most consistent themes was reference to how the leniency shown on offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures at the elite level had negative consequences for grassroots referees through the assumption that it is acceptable to verbally abuse the referee. Addressing the thoughts of many referees was this response from a level 5 referee (male, aged 56+, with 21+ years' experience):

Until the behaviour of players and officials at the top of the system change there is no chance of Respect succeeding. Too many incidents of poor behaviour by professional players are replicated lower down the pyramid, yet the national FA want County referees to be the standard bearers while the elite group appear to be instructed to condone the unacceptable.

The FA and elite referees have more power to control this situation than those at the grassroots level and for many referees this is not being utilised as effectively as it should be. As suggested by O'Gorman (2011), the implementation of 'top-down' approaches like the Respect programme through the national FA, County FA and local associations and clubs leads to questions regarding how they are being delivered, altered or subverted. So, what can be done to improve the experience of referees, particularly those at the grassroots level? One level 6 referee (male, aged 36 to 45, with 3 to 5 years' experience) provided a good starting point: 'Publicly name and shame the clubs with poor respect records via a league table'. Indeed, some County FAs such as Manchester now publish details of teams that have been charged with failing to control spectators and players. This is a start, but it unfortunately

remains an isolated example of a County FA looking at different ways to try and alleviate the abuse referees are facing by publicly naming problem teams. Thus, a broader question remains unanswered between the national FA and the other County FAs as to whether the current system is fit for purpose given the range of responses presented so far in this article.

### **Level of Support**

When the referees were asked about whether the support offered by the national FA since the introduction of the Respect programme was adequate, 4.8 per cent strongly agreed, 27.4 per cent agreed, 34.8 per cent were neutral, 17.6 per cent disagreed, 11 per cent strongly disagreed and 4.4 per cent said it was non-applicable. The figures improved when they were asked about whether the support offered by their respective County FA since the introduction of the Respect programme was adequate: 11.2 per cent strongly agreed, 38.2 per cent agreed, 26.3 per cent were neutral, 13.7 per cent disagreed, 7.7 per cent strongly disagreed and 2.9 per cent said it was non-applicable. Within the data were testimonies from referees who were happy with the support they received from their respective County FA. For example, this level 4 referee (male, aged 26 to 35, with 6 to 10 years' experience) stated: 'The physical abuse was dealt with well by the County FA. In fact the players got a lengthier ban than I felt necessary', whilst a level 6 referee (male, aged 18 to 21, with 3 to 5 years' experience) commented:

It was reported to my County FA. I was given support from my county's Referee Development Officer and other figures within the County FA. The player involved received an extremely lengthy ban. I received exactly the sort of support you would expect from the County FA after an assault on a match official.

One problem facing some County FAs is that there are a small number of individuals expected to service over 2,000 clubs and their associated personnel (including referees). Not surprisingly, therefore, a recurring theme amongst the data was the need for the national FA and County FAs to be more consistent in dealing with misconduct of clubs and players and better support referees who make complaints. For example, this level 4 referee (male, aged 22 to 25 with 6 to 10 years' experience) wrote:

No support was offered to me in the slightest. It is appalling from an organisation who 'bigs up' this programme. First and last thing I heard was an invite to a hearing regarding the offences. Not one phone call to check how I was. They're too interested in looking after the paying members of the league over the people who give their time up to do this.

Reflecting a consistent theme in the data, this level 4 referee (male, aged 46 to 55, with 21+ years' experience) suggested: 'County FAs need to get out and about at grassroots games and

have a procedure for observing poor behaviour. Penalties also need to be increased, such as longer bans and bigger financial penalties', whilst a level 6 referee (male, aged 18 to 21, with 3 to 5 years' experience) agreed that stronger sanctions need to be implemented, but also illustrated how referee inconsistency remains part of the problem:

There needs to be a zero tolerance approach to dissent across the board, similar to that of rugby. Once all officials are given this directive from the FA, and the approach starts to snow ball, it will not take long for officials to shirk their responsibilities when dealing with dissent. Although consistency across match officials is difficult to achieve because of people's interpretation of law and their tolerance levels, it is something we should strive to accomplish. After all, consistency more than anything is what inspires RESPECT in players, coaches and fans.

Given the young age of referees involved in this study there was regular reference to better mentoring and support, but this requires effective management at a local level to place younger, less experienced referees with more experienced officials (Webb et al., 2016). Referees in our study argued that as part of their training they were not adequately prepared for the situations they were facing in matches. For example, this level 7 (junior) referee (male, aged 56+, with 3 to 5 years' experience) argued: 'More support is required for referees under the age of 21, with better mentoring to assist with unexpected events that occur before, during and after matches', whilst a level 7 (junior) referee (male, aged 46 to 55, with 3 to 5 years' experience) suggested: 'All new referees, rather than being thrown out to do six games, need to work as a group with a mentor for those six matches where all referees attend and see incidents and discuss them.' Indeed, one female referee who responded to the survey outlined how she acted as a mentor to junior colleagues, but described how two of these had already had such negative experiences that they had resulted in child protection cases. This can lead to poor self-confidence and anxiety (as found by Anshel and Weinberg, 1995; Balch and Scott, 2007) and the need for County FAs to consider stress coping strategies was a consistent theme in the responses. In providing one example of how some referees think this could be alleviated, this level 7 (junior) referee (male, aged 36 to 45, with 3 to 5 years' experience) stated:

Extend the role and number of welfare officers in clubs who then have a responsibility to randomly observe conduct at games and provide feedback to teams on their behaviour and report to the FA and to support the referees, many of which are children themselves...Ask either retired referees or referees who can no longer do it through injury to become mentors, provide training and be more proactive in supporting active referees.

Referee tutors do deliver training and education within County FAs and grassroots mentors offer guidance and support to those who are newly qualified (Webb, 2014b), but referees at

the junior levels of grassroots football in this study felt this could be managed better. The programme is directed towards the professional and amateur game with the same message, but in grassroots football the referee is often found to be isolated and vulnerable without the support of stewards and the police (like in the professional game). For some referees, there is a further sense of isolation when it comes to disciplinary hearings, such as the narrative from this level 5 referee (male, aged 56+, with 6 to 10 years' experience):

I have reported verbal abuse to a number of County FAs and they do tend to listen and offer support but offenders bring along so many witnesses it is them against the match official and occasionally they get cleared. This is why disciplinary reports have to be well written.

Even those recognised as a mentor to grassroots referees felt that the process needed improving, as outlined by this level 5 referee (male, aged 46 to 55, with 21+ years' experience):

In my capacity as a mentor I have assisted young inexperienced referees to report verbal abuse. I have attended subsequent disciplinary hearings based on these reports. In my experience the national FA and County Football Association arrangements for young referees attending disciplinary hearings are inadequate and fail to take account of the fact that the referee is not an adult...it is intimidating for a young referee to attend a hearing and be sat in close proximity to representatives of the club 'on charge'. For the cases I have attended, on each occasion the club has been found guilty, but there has never been any feedback or reassurance to the young referee. I know of one instance where this prompted the referee concerned to walk away from refereeing.

There was a general sense within responses like this that referees did not feel empowered by the current directive of the programme, particularly given the lack of communication many referees felt was missing in their relationship with County FAs. Without any redistribution of power, referees at grassroots level will continue to oppose policies and retain misgivings focusing on 'respect' (as suggested by Bloyce et al., 2008). Examples included this response by a level 7 (junior) referee (male, aged 56+, with 6 to 10 years' experience):

A major concern is that with all disciplinary matters there is LITTLE IF ANY FEEDBACK TO THE REFEREE on outcomes. As soon as the report goes in there is a wall of silence which is useless for referee development and for building the confidence of referees that action has been taken and real support exists from the local association. The only time the referee appears to be informed/involved is if an appeal is lodged. There should be a feedback mechanism in place so that referees reporting incidents are informed of decisions and outcomes.

Despite the concerns many referees have with regards to a lack of communication, there is still the need for each referee and club personnel to continue to report any abusive behaviour through match reports. Once a report has been submitted, the County FA then has the jurisdiction to sanction individuals and clubs with fines and/or suspensions, but as has been

illustrated above, this practice is inconsistent and questions the current directive given to all County FAs by the national FA or the practice being adopted within individual County FAs.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst the aim of the Respect programme has been to instil a behavioural change amongst players, parents, coaches and spectators through a low-cost public information campaign, we have presented data that illustrates how a top-down focus from the national FA is not influencing bottom-up behaviour change at the grassroots level to the extent desired. Whilst over half of the referees felt that the Respect programme had been somewhat successful, change cannot be guaranteed, particularly given the historical cultural attitudes towards football referees (Webb, 2014a, 2016). As found by Cleland et al. (2015: 561), ‘a change in beliefs and attitudes, or the raising of awareness of the need to act ‘respectfully’ does not necessarily translate into a long-term change in behaviour’. For many referees, the concerns they had before the introduction of the Respect programme remain and this is reflected in nearly two-thirds of referees continuing to receive verbal abuse at least every few games and nearly one in five referees facing some form of physical abuse.

What we have presented is a Respect programme that is not consistently implemented across the 51 County FAs, with referees arguing for stronger and more consistently applied punitive punishments at a local level (i.e. individual and/or club fines, suspensions of clubs, players and parents) as they are clearly not deterring the abuse referees are continuing to face. There is recognition that some County FAs support referees far better than others, but it is important that *all* referees, irrespective of level, are supported when dealing with cases of misconduct against clubs and players and are kept informed of any developments in order to improve their experience of officiating future matches. Most of the personal narrative from referees shows a reactive approach after an incident, where a proactive approach before an incident takes place might have stopped it occurring. Thus, the emphasis is now placed on County FAs to take a more personal approach to referee welfare and implement measures that referees recognise are going to improve their experience.

Although Webb (2014b) recognises that training and support is in place for new referees (such as the 42 per cent in this study who had been refereeing for less than five years), there is a clear need for them to be given effective real-life skills training to prepare for circumstances they are likely to experience. Thus, there should be greater consideration provided to dealing with confrontation and difficult situations on and off the field of play in the basic referee training course. As part of this training, one recommendation put forward by

Cleland et al. (2015) was for new referees to shadow a more experienced referee to get an idea of managing pressurised moments and challenging behaviour and this was also present in the narrative amongst the sample of referees in this study. These views reflected the findings of Dell et al. (2016), who found that a number of referees felt underprepared for what they were experiencing and this impacted on their self-confidence and created a sense of isolation and vulnerability. Thus, there should be a stronger emphasis on providing a support network through greater engagement by the FA and County FAs in providing mentors for referees at all levels of the referee development pathway. This would increase the feeling of support and provide an environment for those referees that experience abuse.

There is now an emphasis placed on the national FA to consider a range of options if it is to achieve its original aims of the Respect programme. One clear finding from the data is the need for a national review of communication and engagement with County FAs, the Referees' Association and grassroots referee groups. This would then lead to increased input and ownership of the Respect programme at a more regional and local level, taking into account regional differences and best practice learned from those County FAs that are seen to effectively support referees when dealing with misconduct by teams, players and parents.

Despite a media campaign aimed at respect there are evidently a number of continuing problems, and there is a need for engagement with referees, players, parents, coaches to improve the environment for all stakeholders. At the time of writing, it seems that the FA now recognize it has a problem, with new measures being introduced from the start of the 2016/17 season to eradicate aggressive behaviour towards referees, where various levels of dissent (including visible disrespect, confrontation and general aggressive responses to decisions) will receive yellow cards and offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures towards match officials will receive a red card. Whilst the results of our research suggest concerns about consistency with regards to the implementation of this new policy, it will provide researchers with further opportunities to evaluate the impact of new measures like this on the experiences of referees at all levels of the game. As stated by Dell et al. (2016: 109), the continued dilemma facing the FA, particularly at the grassroots level, is that any 'attrition or loss in the number of referees that exceeds the number being replaced thus presents a serious challenge to the future of the game', and this goes back to the origins of why a Respect programme was established in the first place.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Similar initiatives occurred in others sports, with the Rugby Football League introducing a ‘respect’ agenda in 2008 to promote pro-social behaviour towards referees and players and in countries like Australia and Canada, similar approaches were introduced that also targeted negative behaviour (Brackenridge et al., 2011).

<sup>2</sup> For the list of referee classifications and descriptions see:  
<http://www.lancashirefa.com/referees/classification>

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